



Game
of
Dukes

A HOT
HISTORICAL CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE SHORT STORY

Steamy Winter Wishes

GRACE CALLAWAY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Steamy Winter Wishes



A Game of Dukes, Heart of Enquiry, & Mayhem in Mayfair Short Story

GRACE
CALLAWAY

*For my readers who've cheered on the Kent family and their friends:
thank you from the bottom of my heart. This one is for you.*

About the Book

Steamy Winter Wishes (A Game of Dukes, Heart of Enquiry, & Mayhem in Mayfair Short Story)

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Let the adventures begin...

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Strathmore Castle, Scotland, 1841. Three days before Hogmanay

“Of all the delightful Scottish traditions at your house party, Emma dear,” Marianne Kent said as she sorted through a pile of newspapers, “I must say ‘redding the house’ counts as my least favorite.”

Wearing one of her oldest dresses with an apron tied over it, Emma Kent McLeod, the Duchess of Strathaven, was busy consulting her list of tasks. Redding the house was an important part of Hogmanay, or Scottish New Year’s Eve, and involved cleaning one’s home to greet the incoming year with good luck. As Emma’s home was Strathmore Castle, a behemoth of a building with turrets, sprawling wings, and over a hundred chambers, there was much work to be done.

At present, Emma was in her husband Alaric’s study, joined by her sisters-in-law Marianne and Tessa Kent and her friend Beatrice Murray. She was reviewing the third item she’d jotted down on her lengthy list: *Tidying Up Alaric’s Study*. Given her husband’s habits, this was a Herculean task and included several sub-items. Normally, Emma, who liked having things orderly, would have enjoyed organizing the room. Yet the truth was she was a bit peaked...and her fatigue confounded her. From the time her mama had passed when she was fourteen to now, her thirty-seventh year, she’d always managed household duties with boundless energy.

In particular, the winter holidays were a time where she put her usual vigor and vim to good use. This year, several dozen guests had descended upon Strathmore Castle, and she’d done plenty of preparation. Things had gone off without a hitch thus far. The halls were decked with holly and mistletoe, the suppers had been delicious, and the activities she’d organized—including an archery tournament, a piano concert given by her sister Thea, and a participatory theatre production for the children—had been well

received.

There was more to come. In Scotland, Hogmanay festivities eclipsed those of Christmas, and she wanted her guests to have an authentic taste of her adopted home's culture. On the eve of the new year, there would be a ritual called "saining the house," which involved blessing the house with sacred water and burning juniper branches to ward off evil. There would also be feasting, singing, and dancing. After the stroke of midnight, the "first-footer" or first visitor of the year would arrive, bearing tidings for the new year. Emma had hired a professional first-footer, a local blacksmith known to bring good luck to the houses he entered.

Now thinking of all she had planned made her feel a teensy bit exhausted.

I just need to get a good night's sleep, she told herself. I'll be right as rain in the morning.

Emma summoned a smile for the other ladies. Against the masculine backdrop of dark-paneled walls, leather upholstery, and rich Aubusson carpets, her three friends tackled their assigned tasks. Marianne, a glamorous silver blonde, sat upon a studded sofa as she rifled through a pile of old newspapers. Tessa, a petite curly-haired brunette whose pregnancy was just beginning to show in her crimson frock, half-heartedly swiped a feather duster over the windowsills. Willowy blonde Bea appeared engrossed in her task: her lavender eyes had a look of concentration as she put a bookshelf in alphabetical order.

Feeling guilty that she was putting her guests to work, Emma said, "You don't have to help, you know. In fact, you ought to be enjoying the activities with the other guests." She furrowed her brow. "You did see the schedule? There are card games and—"

"We saw the schedule. How can we enjoy ourselves knowing that you're slaving away in here?" Tessa rolled her jade-green eyes. "Although that does beg the question: why don't you let your veritable army of servants handle this?"

"Hear, hear." Marianne fanned herself with one of the papers. "Delegation is a lady's prerogative. And you are a duchess after all, Em."

Why does everyone feel the need to remind me? Emma thought with a touch of impatience.

Just this morning, Alaric had made a point of telling her she ought to relax and let the servants take care of everything. As she

had been in the middle of planning amusements for the children—including their own, twelve-year-old Livy and nine-year-old Christopher—she'd been a trifle short with him. He had looked hurt, and she'd instantly felt guilty.

When she'd tried to apologize, Alaric had sighed.

I just don't want you to overdo, pet. You look tired, he'd said. *You know how you get around the holidays...and this year has been a busy one.*

Her mind had snagged on his comment about her looking "tired," but she'd summoned a smile and told him she was fine. Afterward, she'd checked the looking glass, seeing dark smudges beneath her brown eyes and, horror of horrors, a strand of silver in her chestnut-brown hair. She'd plucked it out with a determined hand and carried on with her morning to-do list.

After luncheon, Alaric had taken some of the guests on a pheasant shoot. His absence gave her the prime opportunity to tidy up his study.

"The servants have over a hundred other rooms to contend with, not to mention a house full of guests," Emma said. "The least I can do is take care of a few rooms. Besides, His Grace is particular about his private domain and doesn't permit staff to muck around in here, as he puts it."

Marianne stilled in the act of sorting the newspapers, her fair brows drawing together. "Are you certain Strathaven wants *us* to be in here?"

"We are not staff," Em said airily. "At any rate, it is just his excuse to justify his reluctance to throw anything away. What year is that edition of *The Times*?"

Marianne focused her emerald gaze on the front page. "Oh, dear. 1835."

Em lifted her brows. "You see what I mean?"

"The tendency to hoard must be a male trait." Tessa ambled over, dropping the duster on the floor and plopping herself down in a chair adjacent Marianne. "You ought to see Harry's study."

As Emma had helped to raise her younger brother Harry, she was well aware of his tendencies. He was a brilliant scientist, and his environment oft reflected his diverse and varied interests. In recent years, he'd been heading the research division of Great London Northern Railway, known as GLNR, and become a renowned expert in the field of explosive devices. He'd been caught

up with business in London but was due to arrive soon. Emma couldn't wait to see him.

"Luckily, Mr. Kent has GLNR's laboratory to conduct his experiments in. According to Wick, he has been spending some late nights there of late," Beatrice said from the bookshelves.

"Wick" was Wickham Murray, Bea's husband, an industrialist who was also a partner in GLNR. A charming fellow, he happened to be the brother-in-law of Emma's hoydenish middle sister Violet.

"That bodes well for you, Tessa," Bea went on with a teasing smile. "As Mr. Kent has blown up two laboratories already, I think it is best he doesn't do his experimentation at home."

Emma expected spirited Tessa to have an amusing rejoinder. Instead, Tessa burst into tears. Emma exchanged shocked glances with Marianne and Bea: Tessa, the granddaughter of London's most notorious cutthroat and one of the rare females to oversee a territory in the city's underworld, was no watering pot. Amongst the underclass, she was known as the "Duchess of Covent Garden" and was a fierce protector of the women and children who lived in her domain. She had a spine of steel, and the sight of her sobbing was cause for concern.

Emma rushed over with a handkerchief, everyone gathering around Tessa.

Tessa dabbed at her eyes. "I-I'm sorry."

"You never have to apologize to us, dear," Emma said soothingly. "We've all had our moments."

"Is it the pregnancy?" Marianne's expression was understanding. "The slightest provocation reduced me to tears when I was carrying Sophie."

"It is not that." Tessa's voice hitched. "The truth is...I think Harry has lost interest in me."

She burst into tears again.

As Emma rubbed her sister-in-law's back, she was actually relieved at the apparent cause of Tessa's tears. She knew her brother: Harry was head-over-heels in love with his wife. Although he was a private sort who liked to hold his cards close, he'd never seemed happier. Thus, whatever was going on, Emma was confident that Tessa was mistaken.

"But Mr. Kent adores you." Bea looked confused. "Why would you think he has lost interest?"

"He has been, um, avoiding me for the past few weeks."

Emma frowned. "Could you be more specific?"

Biting her lip, Tessa said, "Well, he has been working late most nights. And when he comes home, he is tired and well, he doesn't try to...to you know." Her cheeks turned rosy. "There has been a *definite* change in his behavior."

"Doesn't that coincide with the first weeks of your pregnancy?" Bea asked. "You told us that you've been feeling rather ill. Isn't it possible that Mr. Kent is merely being considerate?"

"Perhaps. I have been casting my accounts nearly every morning. I have also been perspiring profusely *and* am showing far earlier than the first time around." Tessa's lower lip wobbled. "What man would find that attractive?"

"You should have a talk with my daughter Rosie," Marianne said dryly. "She had the same harebrained notion that her husband had lost interest when she was with child. When she finally got upset enough to talk to him about it, he reassured her of his affections quite convincingly."

"But there's more." Tessa took a deep breath. "Harry lied to me."

Bea frowned. "About what?"

"Three nights before I left to come here, he told me he was working late at his office. But he wasn't at his office."

"How do you know this?" Em asked.

Tessa sniffled. "I had him followed."

"Oh, my dear." Marianne looked torn between amusement and concern. "Are you certain that was the wisest course of action?"

"It is best to know what one is dealing with." Tessa raised her chin, a defiant spark in her eyes. "My grandpapa taught me that."

Emma wondered how to explain to the poor dear that her family's cutthroat methods might not be best suited to marriage.

Instead, she said, "Couldn't you simply talk to Harry?"

"I have tried, but he keeps telling me nothing is wrong. He even suggested that I was overemotional." Tessa crossed her arms with a huff. "Me, the Duchess of Covent Garden, *overwrought*. Imagine that!"

Privately, Emma thought she didn't have to imagine it: it was happening in front of her. Nonetheless, she understood Tessa's insecurity and wanted to help.

"Have you specifically asked Harry about where he was that night?" Emma persisted.

Some of the fire left Tessa's eyes. She shook her head.

"I think you must, dearest," Marianne said firmly. "For your own peace of mind."

"But what if...what if it brings about the very opposite?"

"I promise you it will not. I know Harry," Emma said. "Just talk to him."

"I am not usually such a ninny." Lacing her fingers in her lap, Tessa said in a low voice, "I just haven't felt like myself lately. What with the queasiness and losing Swift Nick..."

Emma squeezed Tessa's shoulder, knowing how much the other grieved for her beloved pet ferret who'd passed away a few months ago.

"And I've never spent the holiday away from Grandpapa and Mama, but they didn't want to travel to Scotland," Tessa said miserably. "Botheration, I am acting like a wet blanket, aren't I? I am sorry to ruin the party spirit."

"You haven't ruined anything. In point of fact, I think this is a good thing," Emma said brightly. "We are redding ourselves as well as the house. Might as well get things off our chest before the new year."

"In that case..." Bea bit her lip. "There is something I would like to say. To you, Emma: thank you for putting my brother on your guest list. Hadleigh is not...well, he's not welcome in some circles, and it was generous of you to include him."

With a stab of empathy, Emma saw the pain that tautened Bea's features, pulling on the thin scar that curved over her right cheek. Bea's younger brother, the Duke of Hadleigh, and his duchess were quite scandalous and considered *personae non gratae* by some sticklers. More than once, Bea had confided in Emma that she was concerned about her brother's drinking and wild behaviors.

Bea had also expressed regret over the years of estrangement between her and Hadleigh, which had been caused by Hadleigh's ruthless pursuit of vengeance against the man who'd caused Bea's scar. Hadleigh's actions had led to tragic consequences, and while he'd tried to make amends, the relationship between the siblings remained distant at best.

Emma, who had five siblings of her own, understood the value of family. Bea clearly cared about her brother, even if she didn't put it in so many words. Emma saw Bea's conflict, the push and pull between love and forgiveness, and wanted to help however she

could.

"Family is family," Emma said softly. "He is welcome here."

Bea gave a grateful nod.

"While we are at it," Marianne spoke up, "I shall add my own concerns: Ambrose works too hard."

Emma had no doubt that her sister-in-law was correct. Ambrose, her half-brother and the oldest of the Kent clan, was one of the most industrious people she knew. He'd been that way all his life. At fourteen, Emma had lost her mama (Ambrose's stepmama), and their papa had fallen into a deep grief that had cost him his position as the village schoolmaster. Ambrose had stepped in, supporting the entire family on his policeman's wages, while Emma had managed the house. Those days back in Chudleigh Crest had been a difficult yet bonding time for their middling class family.

Years later, after Ambrose had married Marianne, a wealthy widow, he could have stopped working. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd founded his own private enquiry business, becoming one of London's most respected investigators. Indeed, there had been a time when Emma's greatest wish had been to work with him at Kent and Associates. She'd persuaded Ambrose to let her join his team...and had met Alaric during her first case.

Nowadays, as a wife, duchess, and mama to two rambunctious children and an infant, she was struggling to find time for sleuthing. Yet the need to be productive burned brightly in her; she well understood Ambrose's work ethic. It ran in the Kent blood.

"Have you tried telling him to work less?" Tessa suggested.

"It is rather like telling a racehorse to slow down," Marianne said wryly. "It is not in his nature. And the truth is, I don't want to dissuade him from pursuing his passion. But I do worry. Investigative work is not without risks...and Ambrose isn't as young as he once was."

"My brother is fit for a man of three-and-fifty," Emma offered. "He doesn't seem his age at all."

"I don't disagree that Ambrose has the stamina of a younger man." Marianne's lips curved faintly. "When it comes down to it, I just wish we could have more time together. It is selfish of me, I know."

"I would not call it selfish to want to spend time with one's husband," Bea said. "I would call it being in love."

There was a misty edge to Marianne's smile. "After twenty-one

years of marriage, I can honestly say that I fall more in love with Ambrose each day.”

“That is...so...*romantic*.” Tessa was crying once more.

“There, there, Tessa.” Marianne exchanged amused glances with Emma and Bea; it wasn’t often that the bold and fearless Duchess of Covent Garden was reduced to such a state. “You are married to a Kent as well. You will feel the same way when you reach my advanced years.”

“Advanced, my foot. You don’t look a day over thirty.” Sniffing, Tessa peered hopefully at her older sister-in-law. “Do you promise I’ll feel that way?”

“I promise. In point of fact, I will make you a deal. I will speak to Ambrose if you speak to Harry when he arrives.” Marianne took out a handkerchief and wiped away Tessa’s tears. “Agreed?”

Tessa’s dark curls bobbed as she nodded.

“Everything’s settled then.” Relieved, Emma rose and headed toward the hearth, where a bucket and broom were waiting. “There’s still more cleaning to do. I have to rake out the ashes—”

“Not so fast.” Marianne raised her brows. “What about you?”

Emma’s heart gave an uncomfortable stutter. “What about me?”

“We are all airing our laundry,” Marianne said. “Don’t you want to take the opportunity to do so as well? To start the new year off on the right foot?”

Emma knitted her brows. “I would, but I don’t have anything to share.”

“You’ve had a busy year,” Marianne reminded her.

Strange, Alaric said the same thing.

Emma took a breath, trying to put aside her list of to-dos and recall all that had happened in the past few months.

“That is true, I suppose.” Frowning, she said, “We had the scare with William...but he is doing much better now.”

William, her one-year-old, had had a mysterious fever and cough that persisted for a few weeks. Emma had spent most of the time by his bedside, not sleeping a wink.

“Thank goodness for that,” Marianne said quietly.

“The other children have been a handful,” Emma admitted after a pause. “Livy especially. Although she is only twelve, she is a girl who knows her mind and follows her own counsel.”

“I wonder who she gets that from,” Tessa said with a chuckle.

Emma rolled her eyes. “Her papa, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Marianne said drolly. “On top of all that, Ambrose told me about the two cases you helped him with this year.”

“They were trifling.” Emma waved a hand. “Matrons who needed help locating some lost jewelry. I conducted a few interrogations and *voilà*. The cases nearly solved themselves.”

“I am tired just *listening* to your accomplishments,” Bea said wryly. “And here you are hosting this grand event for all of us. You must be exhausted.”

“You do look a bit tired,” Tessa said.

Although Tessa’s comment was no doubt well meaning, Emma found it vexing. *Why does everyone think I am tired?*

To prove otherwise, she marched over to the hearth and began sweeping the ashes. As her mama had oft said, idle hands were the devil’s tools. Emma found work calming.

“Everything is fine, really,” she began.

At that moment, the door opened, and Alaric stepped in. He was still dressed for the hunt, and even after thirteen years of marriage, Emma felt a warm tingle at how commandingly virile he looked. Before he met her, he’d been a confirmed rake sought after by all the ladies, and there were still moments when she couldn’t believe that this tall, dark, and wickedly handsome duke was all hers.

Alaric’s silver green gaze went from her face to the broom in her hands to the rest of her apron-covered person. Then he surveyed his study, taking unerring note of the things that had been changed. Finally, her husband’s eyes connected to hers, and the coolness in those pale green depths sent a quiver down her spine. His look told her that they would be having a discussion later.

Being a well-bred gentleman, however, he greeted their guests with cordial grace.

“Pardon, ladies.” He inclined his dark head. “I did not mean to intrude.”

“How could you be intruding, sir? This is your study, after all,” Marianne said pleasantly. “We are the ones who should be apologizing.”

Tessa was trying to discreetly shove the feather duster beneath the chair with her foot while Bea cast a nervous glance at the bookshelves she’d rearranged.

Not wanting her friends to get caught in the crossfire, Emma spoke up. “It is my fault. I asked them to help me tidy up the study, as part of redding the house.”

“We do retain servants for that purpose.” Alaric’s tone was mild; the look in his eyes was not. “You have plenty of other things to do. A houseful of guests to host, for instance.”

“There are various activities to keep everyone occupied this afternoon.” She lifted her chin. “I thought I would take this time to neaten things up in here.”

After a pause, he said without inflection, “You will, of course, do as you please. I must change. Please excuse me, ladies.”

With a curt bow, he left.

In the awkward silence that followed, the ticking of the long case clock was nearly as loud as that of Emma’s heartbeat in her ears.

Marianne cleared her throat. “Perhaps you should go speak to him?”

“There is no need. Everything is fine,” Emma said.

Inside, she was filled with bewildered frustration. On top of everything else she was trying to manage, now she had an annoyed husband to contend with... She forced down the sudden heat behind her eyes, turning instead to the task of cleaning the hearth. It was easier to face a dirty grate than her friends’ sympathetic faces.

“Are you certain?” Tessa asked doubtfully. “The duke looked, um, a bit perturbed.”

“He will get over it.” Emma started raking up the ashes to distract herself from her whirling hurt. “Shall we discuss the plans for this evening? I have a new parlor game planned...”

2

Later that afternoon, Wickham Murray cradled his infant daughter in his arms. "Is my poor little Clementia still hungry?"

She cooed at him, her wide lavender eyes as mesmerizing as her mama's.

He stroked her downy cheek. "Unfortunately, I am useless for that."

"I just finished nursing Tia. She cannot possibly want more," his wife said from the bed.

Bea lounged against the pillows in the flannel robe she wore when nursing. Which meant...she was naked beneath. Being a considerate husband, Wick had planned to let his wife nap before supper but now amended his plan.

He slanted his wife a wicked look. "Tia is my daughter after all, and we Murrays are known for our prodigious appetites."

Seeing the blush that rose on Bea's beautiful face, Wick decided it was time to ring for the nurse. After the good woman obligingly collected her charge, he locked the door and headed toward the bed. He settled upon it, pulling Bea into his arms.

She snuggled against him, and he relished the tranquility of the moment. Outside the window, snow started to fall, dusting the woods and pond in the distance with sugar-like drifts.

He gazed at his wife. "What a beautiful sight."

"It is a treat," she agreed. "Emma says that it is a particularly severe winter, and even the pond has frozen over."

"I'm not talking about the snow." Winding a strand of his wife's white-gold around his finger, he smiled at her. "But that is pretty too."

Her lavender eyes sparkled. "You are a flirt, Mr. Murray."

"Only with you, sweeting."

He kissed her. He'd meant it to be a tender kiss, but when the minx parted her lips, he had to take a more thorough taste. He rolled her onto her back, pressing his tongue deep into her mouth and his stiffened member against her sleek thigh. She sighed, her robe parting and revealing her plump breasts. The swollen globes

with their enlarged pink peaks were an erotic contrast to her willowy figure, and a primitive part of him responded to this new lushness which he'd had a hand in bringing about.

He lowered his head to her bounty, swiping his tongue over the areola. The sweet trace of milk brought a rush of lust to his veins. He suckled, grunting in pleasure as warm fluid squirted onto his tongue.

"Wick," she said breathlessly. "That is wicked."

"I know." He lifted his head, flashing her a devilish grin. "If you don't want me to deprive our babe of her meal, then I shall have to find something else to eat..."

He kissed his way down his wife's belly, her gasps of pleasure filling his ears. After he feasted his fill, he tore off his clothes and joined his body with hers. Staring into her pleasure-dazed eyes, surrounded by her snug heat, he let the ripples of her climax wring him of his own.

Panting, he collapsed onto the bed, pulling her against him.

"I was going to let you nap before supper," he murmured.

"Liar." She circled his nipple with a delicate fingertip. "You planned to debauch me all along."

He yawned. "Tupping can be a first-rate sedative."

"Not for me," she said, rolling her eyes. "You know that."

He did. He'd always found Bea's post-coital energy charming.

"Since you let me have my way with you, we can do whatever you want now," he said magnanimously.

When her expression grew somber, he guessed what was on her mind. His ability to read his wife's thoughts, and vice versa, had continued to grow over their year of marriage. It wouldn't be long, he thought with wry humor, before they were finishing one another's sentences.

"How was Hadleigh during the shoot?" she asked with care.

Wick inwardly cursed his wife's brother for causing her pain. At the same time, he felt a stab of empathy for Hadleigh: he knew what it was like to have made grievous mistakes. To carry the burden of shame and regret and to long for redemption. In Wick's case, he'd found his absolution with Beatrice.

In Hadleigh's case, redemption still seemed a long way off. Wick didn't think Bea's brother was a bad man at the core—Hadleigh had, after all, come to Bea's rescue during her adventures last year—but the fellow did seem...lost.

“Your brother was himself,” Wick said honestly. “Crapulous and withdrawn.”

“I *do* wish he would drink less,” Bea burst out.

Wick thought privately that drink might not be Hadleigh’s only vice. While Bea’s brother was blessed with the family’s good looks, he had a gauntness that Wick associated with opium users. Years of dissolute behavior had also aged Hadleigh beyond his twenty-four years.

Not wanting to add to Bea’s worries, Wick said quietly, “Your brother has demons, and only he can decide how to manage them.”

“I know.” Bea’s gaze darkened. “But I wish his wife were a better influence. I have my personal reasons for disliking her, as well you know, but they fade in comparison to the harm she is doing Hadleigh. She is the reason they are the scandal of the *ton*. The way she plays on his jealousy, goads him to wild behavior, and manipulates him...it makes me quite ill to think of it.”

“Then don’t.” Wick framed his wife’s face between his palms. “Your brother is a grown man and must live and die by his own decisions.”

Bea sighed. “I do wish I could talk some sense into Hadleigh, but after the years of estrangement, our relationship doesn’t allow for that. I don’t know *how* to talk to him anymore.”

The sadness on her face tightened Wick’s chest. If there was anything he could do in service of his beloved’s happiness, he would do it. Without hesitation.

He cleared his throat. “Would you like *me* to?”

“You?” Bea looked startled. “What would you say to him?”

“Probably something along the lines of, *would you care for a game of billiards?*”

His wife snorted. “*That* is the advice you’re going to give him?”

“Sweeting, gentlemen don’t have heartfelt *tête-à-têtes*. We drink, gamble, and play sports together. What I can offer your brother is a healthy version of that camaraderie. At the very least, it will be better than him brooding on his own and drinking in the corner.”

“Thank you.” Smiling tremulously, she kissed his jaw. “Have I told you how much I adore you?”

“Not today.” He slid his hand between her thighs, and the feel of her warm, flowering flesh brought renewed heat to his loins. “But you could show me...again.”

“Wick, we have to change for supper...”

When her words melted into a moan, he smiled against her lips.
“I’ll make it quick.”

3

Two days before Hogmanay

“Papa, is Aunt Emma a queen?”

Ambrose Kent smiled at his six-year-old daughter Sophie. She had her small mittened hand tucked in his, her blonde curls peeping out from beneath her cap. Her fur-trimmed navy wool coat was a miniature replica of the one worn by Marianne, who held Sophie’s other hand. The three of them were enjoying a leisurely morning stroll through the snow-dusted grounds of Strathmore Castle.

“No, poppet,” he replied. “Emma is a duchess, not a queen. Why do you ask?”

“Because she lives in a castle,” Sophie said, her amber eyes wide. “And Uncle Alaric has as many servants as a king.”

Chuckling, Ambrose exchanged a look with his wife over their youngest child’s head. *Out of the mouths of babes...*

“Would you like to live in a castle one day?” he asked.

Sophie appeared to think it over, swinging her hand in his. Then she shook her head. “I don’t care where I live...as long as it is with you, Mama, and Edward.”

His daughter’s innocent words caused an unexpected pang in Ambrose’s chest. Gazing down at Sophie’s angelic face, he had a sudden irrational desire to freeze time. To keep her and his family exactly where they were and preserve this moment of happiness.

Hoots and laughter broke Ambrose’s reverie. When he saw the group up ahead, he smiled.

Silly of me to try to freeze a single moment, he thought. When other perfect moments are around the corner.

It appeared that an impromptu snowball fight was taking place, with females on one side and males on the other. Leading the charge for the ladies—unsurprisingly—was his sister Violet, her caramel-colored eyes lit up with delight as she pelted her husband Richard Murray, Viscount Carlisle, in his brawny chest. Their three young sons groaned at their mama’s prowess while Carlisle simply began to gather together a massive snowball, a wolfish gleam in his

eyes.

Ambrose's sister Polly giggled helplessly as she and Ambrose's oldest daughter, Rosie, were cornered by their husbands.

"Don't worry, Pols," Rosie said, tossing her blonde curls. "They wouldn't dare."

Her husband, Andrew Corbett, exchanged a look with Polly's spouse Sinjin Pelham, the Duke of Acton.

"She's right," Corbett said with a sigh. "I cannot hit my wife with a snowball."

"See?" Rosie turned triumphantly to Polly...and that was her mistake.

In the next instant, Corbett snatched her by the waist and gently pressed the handful of snow he'd been hiding behind his back into her face. Rosie looked so comically shocked that Ambrose had to stifle a laugh.

"But I *can* give her a proper face wash." Smiling, Corbett bent and kissed Rosie on the nose whilst she sputtered.

Polly made a run for it, her golden-brown curls bouncing. Acton stalked her with determined strides, while their son shouted, "Hurry, Mama, or Papa will catch you!"

"Sophie, come play!" The shout came from Miranda, the Corbetts' eldest who also happened to be Sophie's bosom chum.

"May I?" Sophie looked at her parents.

"Go on," Ambrose said. "Just watch out for your Carlisle cousins. They're a bloodthirsty lot."

As Sophie scampered off to join forces with Miranda and her cousin Olivia, Emma and Strathaven's eldest, Ambrose put his arm around Marianne's waist. She rested her glorious blonde head on his shoulder. In the distance, he saw his sister Thea walking hand-in-hand with her husband, the Marquess of Tremont, their twins racing over to join the raucous snowball fight.

Holding his wife, watching their family play around them, Ambrose knew life did not get better than this. He was grateful for all the blessings he'd been given and, of late, had been thinking about how he wanted to enjoy them fully. Things changed so quickly, and he wanted to make the most of every precious moment.

"Where do you suppose Emma is?" he said idly. "Apart from supper, I've hardly seen her all week."

Marianne lifted her head from his shoulder. "She's probably still

redding the house. Frankly, I'm a bit worried about her. The poor dear has been working herself to the bone to make this holiday enjoyable for everyone...except for herself."

Ambrose frowned. "Come to think of it, she does look a bit tired."

"Yesterday, Beatrice, Tessa, and I tried to talk her into delegating some of the work, but she seems determined to do it all herself."

"That sounds like Em." Thinking of the years when he'd been the breadwinner and Em had managed their siblings and the house, he said with a pang of regret, "Since she was barely more than a child, she has shouldered much responsibility. She is used to managing everything, and I suppose it is a hard habit to break. For a stretch, Christmas, in particular, was a difficult time. My policeman's wages barely put food on the table, let alone much of anything else. It was always Em who found ways to make the holidays fun for our younger siblings."

"I know, darling. But that time is over," Marianne said. "Emma deserves to enjoy herself."

"You are right, of course. I will speak with her," Ambrose decided. "See if she'll listen to her older brother."

"If she will be guided by anyone, it is you. And Strathaven, of course." Marianne gave him a wry look. "Although His Grace looked none too happy to find the four of us tidying up his study."

"I don't blame the chap. A study is a man's private sanctuary," Ambrose said with feeling. "After the maid goes through, I can never find anything."

Marianne aimed her gaze heavenward. "Harry takes after you, apparently. Tessa was remarking upon his tendency to, shall we say, accumulate."

Amused, Ambrose said, "I am beginning to suspect that your bonding session with the ladies involved more than a few complaints. What else did you talk about?"

"What goes on between ladies stays between ladies."

"Very discreet, I'm sure."

"Although...if you're going to have a chat with Emma, you might have one with Harry too, once he arrives." Marianne lowered her voice. "Tessa believes he is losing interest in her."

"That is absurd." Ambrose looked for his sister-in-law; she was chatting with Thea and Tremont, while trying to hold onto her and

Harry's rambunctious toddler Bartholomew. "Harry is head-over-heels in love with her. I have never seen him so content."

"What is obvious to others may not be obvious to oneself," his wife said sagely. "The poor dear was quite distraught."

"I'm sure Harry will iron things out when he arrives."

Ambrose was not worried. First, he knew his brother, and when a Kent fell in love, they did so forever. Second, from his own personal experience, women could get a bit emotional when they were with child. Being a wise man and one with a healthy sense of self-preservation, he did not voice that opinion to his lady wife.

Another thought occurred to him then.

Lifting a brow, he said, "Did you have any grievances to contribute to your ladies' conversation?"

He was teasing, mostly, and thus was surprised to see a tinge of rose appear on Marianne's slanted cheekbones.

"What is it, my love?" He tilted his head, setting her away from him so that he could study her. "Are you unhappy about something?"

Whatever it was, he would fix it forthwith. His fortunes had changed the moment he met Marianne twenty-one years ago. Many had thought that the match between a wealthy, sophisticated baroness and a poor Thames River policeman was a *mésalliance*, but he and Marianne had proven the naysayers wrong. Despite their many years together, he still thanked his lucky stars that she'd taken him and his siblings on. That he'd managed to claim such a loyal, loving, and clever beauty as his own.

She fiddled with the lapels of his woolen coat, her gaze on her kid-gloved fingers. "I'm not unhappy, Ambrose. Far from it."

"Then what is it?" It wasn't like Marianne to dither. She was direct by nature, and the fact that she wasn't telling him her thoughts outright was cause for concern.

She lifted her peerless emerald eyes to his. "It is just that sometimes...I wish we had more time together. Like this."

He understood then. Relief filled him...along with wry amusement.

"You know you're an old married couple when you share the same thoughts," he said.

"Who are you calling old?" Marianne asked archly.

"Never you, my beautiful selkie." He brushed his gloved knuckles over her cheek. "The truth is I've been having similar

thoughts: that I would like to spend more time with you and the family and less chasing after criminals and the like. We don't need the money, and I am certain that my partners would be happy to take over Kent and Associates. Lugo and McLeod know the business as well as I do. If they need my help on a case, I would be available for consultation. "As he spoke the words aloud, he realized just how ready he was to say them. "It seems like a good time for me to retire."

"Truly?"

The longing in his wife's eyes hit him in the gut, reinforcing the rightness of his choice.

She drew a breath. "Because, darling, I would never want you to stop doing what you love."

"I love you. More than anything," he stated. "And more and more with each passing year."

"Oh, Ambrose." She smiled tremulously. "You are everything to me."

He dipped his head to kiss her. He meant it to be a tender gesture, but the lushness of his wife's lips, the needy way her fingers clutched his shoulders, brought a familiar fire to his loins. He deepened the kiss, losing himself in her delectable warmth...

Whoops and laughter brought him back to earth. He drew back from Marianne, grinning to find her blushing like a newlywed bride. His sisters were giggling, their husbands fighting back smiles. His daughters were standing together, his eldest with her hands on his youngest's shoulders.

"Don't be scandalized, Sophie dear," Rosie said cheekily. "That is just Mama and Papa's way of showing that they love one another."

"I am not scandalized," Sophie told her. "They do it all the time."

Which led to more general merriment.

"I have had enough of the snow," Marianne announced with great dignity. "I am going back inside."

She sashayed toward the house, turning to give him a come-hither look. One that said, *You are welcome to join me.*

Ambrose's heart and a lower part of his anatomy swelled with anticipation.

Goddamn, but retirement was going to be sweet.

4

The day before Hogmanay

Early the next morning, Bea was corralled by her sister-in-law Violet. Vi was married to Wick's older brother Richard Murray, Viscount Carlisle, and Bea had grown very fond of the vivacious brunette, whom she'd come to think of as a sister. They'd bonded over their love for the Murray brothers...and their frustration over their prickly and difficult to please mama-in-law. Whenever the dowager did something irritating, Bea could count on Vi's lively sense of humor to lighten the mood.

"Follow me," Vi whispered now. "We're having a secret meeting in the solarium."

Before Bea could ask the purpose of the clandestine gathering, the other was already on the move. She followed Vi's slender, yellow-clad form to the solarium. Inside the glass-enclosed space, the lush greenery was a dramatic contrast to the winter landscape framed by the floor-to-ceiling windows. They passed a fountain filled with orange and silver fish and entered a citrus grove where a group of Kent sisters and wives had already gathered.

They were a lovely bunch in their colorful dresses, chattering happily with one another.

Bea found a space next to Tessa.

"Any news from Mr. Kent?" Bea asked.

Tessa's smile was brave. "No...but the snow is probably affecting the mail. Harry promised he would be here by the new year."

Bea squeezed her hand. "Then I am certain he will keep his promise."

"I am calling the meeting to order," Violet called above the din.

The ladies fell silent, except for Rosie Corbett. The beautiful blonde, who much resembled her mama, raised her hand.

"Can we make this quick?" she asked. "I promised Andrew I would spend the morning with him."

Vi raised her brows. "I'm surprised you would want to after he gave you a proper face washing."

“He made up for it.” Blushing, Rosie said apologetically, “Between the children and his charity work, we haven’t had much time alone and—”

“Run along, dear,” Marianne said to her daughter. “I’ll catch you up on the plan later.”

With a grateful nod, Rosie dashed off.

“Crumpets, we’re down a set of hands already,” Vi muttered.

“Perhaps you had better get to the reason for meeting then?” Polly, the Duchess of Acton, suggested.

“Right. We’re here to help Emma. As many of us have noticed, our sister is working too hard, and we must stop her,” Vi declared.

Bea had to ask. “Um, how do we do that?”

“By completing the tasks on her list before she gets to them,” Vi said.

“How do we know what is on this list?” Bea asked.

Vi beamed. “Thanks to our ingenious and sticky-fingered Tessa, we have Emma’s list.”

Tessa produced a sheet of paper with a little flourish. The ladies gathered around her to examine the list. As a woman who’d managed her own estate for years, Bea thought herself a mistress of organization, but the Duchess of Strathaven’s long and detailed notes impressed even her.

“How could she possibly accomplish all of that?” Bea murmured as she scanned the lengthy list.

“Trust me, Em can manage anything,” Vi said. “She managed us Kents for all those years. It is time we help her back.”

“How are we going to prevent Emma from getting involved?” Marianne asked. “You know she will not sit idly by while there is work to be done.”

“That is why I sent a decoy.” Vi’s smile was smug. “Thea is keeping her occupied.”

That explained the second eldest Kent sister’s absence.

“There are enough tasks to go around.” Polly’s striking aquamarine eyes were focused on the list. “Should we all volunteer for one?”

“I volunteer *not* to clean any hearths,” Marianne put in.

“You cannot un-volunteer yourself,” Vi protested. At Marianne’s look, she relented. “*Fine*. I’ll take the hearth. We can cross that item off the list...as well as the one involving the children’s games today. I have enlisted Fredward for the latter.”

“Fredward” was the nickname for Edward Kent and Frederick Ridgely, Marianne and Thea’s respective sons, who’d been the best of friends since they were boys. Now the young men were visiting during a break from university.

“You put my son in charge of the children?” Marianne shuddered. “Anything could happen.”

From what Bea knew of Edward, he was a genius and had a penchant for following his intellectual pursuits...sometimes without considering all the consequences. In that regard, he was a lot like his uncle Harry.

“Don’t worry,” Vi said airily. “Edward and Freddy designed a treasure hunt. I was there when they announced it to the children at breakfast, and you should have seen the excitement. Livy took off like a shot in search of the prize.”

“Well done, Vi,” Polly said in her sincere manner. “I will take any task on the list. The important thing is that we get everything done so that our dear sister can enjoy Hogmanay.”



* * *

Later that afternoon, Bea giggled, ducking away from her husband as he attempted to kiss her...again.

“Wickham, we’re supposed to be working,” she said severely. “Do not make me regret enlisting you to help.”

She tried for a stern expression, but it was difficult when her too-handsome husband looked at her with puppy dog eyes, a thick wave of gilded brown hair falling boyishly upon his brow.

He pointed up at the doorway under which they were standing. “It isn’t my fault that our assignment involves standing beneath the mistletoe.”

“Our job is to add these pieces of rowan tree to the sprigs of mistletoe to bring good luck in the new year.” Bea gestured to the basket of leafy branches on the ground. “If we stop to kiss at every doorway, we’ll be at it until next Hogmanay.”

“If one is going to do a job, one might as well do it thoroughly,” Wick said with a grin so charming she thought it ought to be illegal. “Even if it takes all year.”

Raised voices interrupted their banter. The din seemed to be coming from the antechamber.

“I wonder what is going on,” she said.

“Let’s find out.”

Wick took her hand, and they headed in the direction of the ruckus. They passed the sprawling marble antechamber, entering the drawing room. A crowd of guests had gathered, and Bea stopped short when she saw the cause of the uproar: her brother stood by the fire, and in his arms was little Lady Olivia McLeod. They were both soaking wet.

The Duke and Duchess of Strathaven rushed into the room, the guests parting to make way for the concerned parents.

“Dear heavens,” Emma exclaimed. “What has happened?”

Hadleigh looked uncomfortable, and Bea felt a sharp pang. Her little brother had worn that expression whenever he got into scrapes as a boy. Only now, he was a man with a blackened reputation...and he was holding the Strathavens’ beloved daughter in his arms.

“I solved the clues to the treasure hunt. I found the prize but fell into the pond trying to get it,” Lady Olivia said, her voice clear despite the chattering of her teeth.

A collective gasp went up as horror clamped around Bea’s heart.

“There was ice everywhere, and I couldn’t get out, but the Duke of Hadleigh saved me.” Despite her ordeal, Lady Olivia beamed at Hadleigh, adulation sparkling in her green eyes. “He jumped into the water and fished me out. He is a hero.”

“I do not know how to thank you, sir,” Emma said in a trembling voice.

“There is no need,” Hadleigh muttered. “I did what anyone would have.”

“We must get Livy dry and warm,” Emma fretted.

Strathaven took the little girl from Bea’s brother, pausing to say hoarsely, “I will not forget this favor you have done my family, Hadleigh. I am forever in your debt.”

Then the duke and duchess headed off with their daughter. Lady Olivia’s voice floated behind them, “I know I shouldn’t have climbed the tree, Mama, but I had to get the crown. I won the

treasure hunt, which means I am queen for the day..."

The guests dispersed as well, some stopping to offer words of praise to Hadleigh, who stood there awkwardly dripping onto the carpet. Accompanied by Wick, Bea approached her brother. He looked at her warily, his dark sapphire eyes rimmed with red, his skin pale and taut over his bones, his shoulders hunched. The usual tension settled between them, paralyzing her tongue even as her mind spun with things she ought to say.

You should change out of your wet things. You'll catch a cold if you don't. You need to stop drinking. To sleep and eat more...

"That was a brave deed, Your Grace." Wick's voice bridged the void.

"It was nothing." Hadleigh shrugged. "I was glad I was there to assist."

"It was lucky for Livy that you were," Wick said seriously. "She is a sweet little thing, if a trifle headstrong. Hopefully she will have learned her lesson."

A sudden spark of humor lit Hadleigh's eyes. "Somehow I doubt it."

Wick grinned. "You are probably right. Her parents have their hands full. And God help the man she one day marries."

Bea narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Do you have something against strong and independent women?"

"I love them. One in particular," he said.

Hadleigh let out a rusty laugh. "Smoothly done, Murray."

"Your sister keeps me on my toes," Wick replied.

"I do hate to interrupt this male camaraderie, but do you think perhaps my brother ought to get changed?" Bea inquired. "He will catch his death of cold otherwise."

Wick slung an arm around her waist. "Always the worrier, aren't you, sweeting?"

"Bea has been that way since we were children," Hadleigh said.

Bea felt a kick of warmth in her chest at her brother's easy use of her nickname and the affection that eased the lines on his haggard face.

"Do you blame me?" she said, aiming her gaze ceilingward. "You were forever falling out of trees and the like. Mama was quite convinced that you were accident-prone."

"Our mama was a worrier too," Hadleigh quipped.

Wick laughed, and her brother did too. The hope in Bea grew.

Perhaps a true rapprochement with her brother was possible after all...

“Hadleigh, there you are!”

At the brittle, silvery tones, Bea stiffened, her hope withering. She didn’t have to turn to know who it was. Her brother’s wife Arabella had once been her best friend. It was not until after the accident that had left Bea scarred that she’d discovered Arabella’s true nature.

Wick tightened his arm around her waist, and Bea welcomed his strength as Arabella approached. Since she had reconnected with Hadleigh, she had kept his wife at arm’s length. Forgiving her brother was a possibility; forgiving Arabella’s betrayal was not.

Arabella arrived at Hadleigh’s side in a swish of lavish silk and lace. With her inky hair and green eyes, she was a beautiful woman...at least on the surface.

“Your Grace,” Wick said politely.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Murray.” Arabella’s coy tone made Bea grind her teeth, for more than one reason.

Not only was Arabella flirting with Bea’s husband, she seemed completely uncaring of the fact that her own was sopping wet.

“It is a good afternoon, thanks to the heroics of your husband,” Wick said smoothly. “Hadleigh saved the day.”

“Oh?” Smiling thinly, Arabella looked at Hadleigh. “Is that why you are in such a bedraggled state, my dear?”

Bea couldn’t hold her tongue. “Ben is wet because he saved a little girl from drowning. He could use some care and attention. Perhaps assistance getting out of his wet things and some brandy.”

Bea caught her brother’s surprised look.

“I know what my husband needs.” Arabella sniffed. “Come along, Hadleigh. I shall ring for your valet to help you.”

As the pair headed out of the room, Bea called out, “Ben.”

Her brother turned and said warily, “Yes?”

“You did well today. I am glad that you were there for Livy,” she said.

Emotion glittered in his eyes, his throat bobbing above his sodden cravat. After a moment, he gave a gruff nod and followed his wife out.

Bea exhaled, leaning into Wick.

“Do you think he will be all right?” she murmured.

“I don’t know, love.” He brushed his lips against her temple.

“But the fact that you care probably makes all the difference to him.”

5

Alone in the kitchens late that evening, Emma made the hot water pastry for Alaric's favorite mutton pie. Since Livy's near drowning, she'd spent the day glued to her daughter. She'd been so worried that she hadn't gone down for supper, her sisters assuring her that they would take on hostess duties in her stead. Emma had remained by Livy's bedside, and while her daughter chattered on about Hadleigh's heroics, she'd been overwhelmed by a tide of emotion.

I could have lost my daughter. I didn't keep a close enough eye on her. There is too much to do: how shall I ever keep track of it all?

She felt like one of the jugglers her children adored at Astley's Amphitheatre. Only she was losing grip over her balls. One by one, they were slipping from her grasp, and she didn't know how to keep them all in the air.

After Livy had fallen asleep, Emma had come down to the kitchens instead of returning to her bedchamber. She was too frazzled to sleep...and too overwrought to deal with her husband.

Alaric had also spent several hours by their eldest's bedside. Although they'd both been focused on Livy, Emma had taken comfort from his arm around her shoulders and his silent strength. Eventually, he had left to tend to their guests, and she had missed him dreadfully.

With a stab of shame, she admitted to herself that she'd been avoiding Alaric since the incident in his study two days ago. He had given her a wide berth as well, which spoke to his level of irritation. In truth, she knew she was at fault: she had overstepped. She had known full well that he did not want his study "organized" yet she'd given into some strange compulsion to do it anyway. Moreover, the house party was demanding all of her dwindling energy, and she had been a trifle short with him as a result.

What's done is done. All I can do is make it up to him.

As an apology, she had decided to bake his favorite pie. She'd learned the basic recipe from the Cook years ago, then perfected it with her own secret blend of seasonings. Alaric had declared that her pie was the best he'd ever had, and she had taken special care

with the current batch.

Molding the dough around the bottom of a small jar, she created neat pastry cups. She filled them with the minced mutton and onion mixture she'd made, seasoned with mace, nutmeg, and a few drops of a special condiment specially delivered from Worcester. She topped each pie with a lid of pastry, poking a venting hole into the dough. After putting the pies in the oven, she poured herself a cup of tea and sat in a chair by the worktable.

The homey fragrance of baking pies soon filled the kitchen. She had a sudden memory of herself cooking in her childhood kitchen: making hotchpotch from odds and ends, trying to stretch the skimpy ingredients into a meal that would feed her siblings, worrying that there wouldn't be enough. Her eyes suddenly heated; she felt the strangest urge to cry.

"I thought I might find you here, pet."

She jumped up. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't heard her husband enter the kitchen. As ever, the sight of him sped up her pulse. With his thick dark hair still damp from a bath, his lean muscular form clad in a burgundy dressing gown and trousers, he was a study in male virility.

As his pale green gaze roved over her, she felt a prick of unease. While he was dashingly attractive, she was not in her best state. Her gown was crumpled from sitting on Livy's bed all day...not that he could see much of it since it was covered in a stained apron. Tendrils of her heavy chestnut hair had tumbled from their pins, hanging around her face. And she probably smelled of mutton pies.

Her throat constricted. "I couldn't sleep. After today..."

"I thought as much. I checked on Livy on the way down here. Still sleeping, peaceful as a lamb." His mouth quirked. "Not a single worry in her pretty, troublesome head."

Emma sighed. "Perhaps we ought to have given her more of a lecture."

"An approach that has worked so well in the past." He reached out, tucking a loose lock behind her ear, his touch chasing goose pimples over her skin. "Livy is her mama's daughter, which means she would spit in the devil's eye if it pleased her."

"I would not..."

Seeing the sardonic lift of his brows, she trailed off. Bit her lip. While she had many faults, she prided herself on being honest.

Emma took a deep breath. "I am sorry for intruding upon your

study the other day. I know you don't like it when—"

"I don't give a damn about the study."

"You don't?" She drew her brows together. "But you have been annoyed with me..."

"Not because of the study. And not so much annoyed as concerned." He curled a finger beneath her chin, and when she met his gaze, it was concern that she saw in those celadon depths. "You have been working yourself to the bone over this party. I can see how tired you are, and others have noticed it too."

She swallowed over a lump of embarrassment. "I know I don't look my best—"

"Devil take it!"

His oath startled her, as did the way he moved in a smooth motion to cage her against the worktable. With his hands on the wooden surface on either side of her, he leaned in. "You are not listening to me. I could give a damn about how tired you look; you are, and always will be, the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. What I do care about is *you*. Why you feel the need to push yourself past limits that even you possess."

The fire in his eyes melted her defenses. Her vision blurred. The next thing she knew, she buried her head in her husband's chest and began to weep. His arms closed around her. Surrounded by his strength and familiar spicy scent, she let herself cry, soothed by his whispers of love.

When the storm passed, she didn't lift her head. Just kept it tucked against the steady beat of her beloved's heart as she spoke.

"I've been feeling like a juggler losing control of the balls," she confessed. "There is so much to do, and I fear I cannot keep up."

"Instead of keeping up, why not set your own pace?" Her husband's deep voice rumbled beneath her ear. "Emma, this has been a challenging year for all of us, especially with little William's illness. You've borne the brunt of it, nursing him tirelessly for months. And you've had the usual antics of our other offspring to contend with, not to mention the myriad other household duties. On top of that, you worked on two investigations *and* planned an elaborate fortnight-long holiday party for several dozen guests. Don't you think you could use a break?"

"When you put it that way." She tipped her head back to look into his eyes. "I suppose I may have overcommitted myself a touch."

“A touch?” He snorted. “Pet, you accomplish more in a year than many people do in a lifetime. And while that is commendable, it also has a cost. You take care of everyone and everything but not yourself. And if I have seemed irritated, that is why. You are everything to me, and it pains me to see you unhappy and exhausted.”

“Oh, darling.” She touched his jaw, her heart swelling with love. “You are too good to me. And I know I’ve been acting a trifle batty of late.”

He quirked a brow. “A trifle?”

“Maybe more than that.” Sighing, she said, “I am aware that I’ve been driving everyone mad with my redding of the house. Thea was apparently supposed to act as a decoy today: her job was to keep me occupied while the others took care of the chores for me. Instead, Thea, being Thea, told me the truth of their plan, and we had a heart to heart. She reminded me that we are no longer in Chudleigh Crest, and I don’t have to be in charge of everything.”

“She is right,” Alaric said. “Your brother said much the same to me.”

Emma blinked. “Ambrose spoke with you about me?”

“He was going to talk to you personally, but since you were holed up with Thea, he spoke with me instead. He didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know. Don’t worry, pet. Your secrets are safe.”

“I don’t have any secrets,” she protested.

“I know. It is one of the many things I adore about you.” Her husband smiled faintly. “But Kent did remind me that, no matter how accomplished you are, you still need to be taken care of. And I want to take care of you, love. The way you take care of me and our family.”

“You do take care of me, darling. The problem lies with me.” Something settled inside her as she faced the truth. “When I feel overwhelmed, my first instinct is to work harder. To do more. Silly when I say it aloud, isn’t it?”

“Not so silly. That strategy has helped you through some difficult times.”

The understanding in her husband’s expression loosened the knots inside her. “But what I really need to do now is to let go of some things.”

He waited.

“I didn’t enjoy those cases I took on this year as much as I did

previously. I may be ready for a hiatus from sleuthing,” she admitted.

“Then take one.”

She bit her lip. “Is it wrong to give up something I’ve worked so hard on?”

“Only you know the answer to that, love. But people change, so why should our interests not as well?”

“You wouldn’t mind?” At his questioning look, she clarified, “When we first met, I was endeavoring to become an investigator, and I think that was part of the reason you were attracted to me. Because I was different from the other ladies vying for your interest.”

“You honestly believe that?”

At his incredulous tone, she nodded hesitantly.

“Emma, I fell in love with you because you are *you*. Loving, loyal, and with the strength of will to take me on, demons and all.” He cupped her face in his hands. “I don’t give a damn what you do as long as you’re mine.”

She felt tears well again. “I do love you so.”

“I am glad because you are stuck with me until death do us part.” He took out a handkerchief, wiping her eyes. “Now, what other things can we take off your plate?”

Sniffling, she said, “I think I would like more help with Livy and Christopher.”

“Hire more staff.” His lips twitched, and he spoke before she could. “Yes, I know that is my solution to everything. But trust me, pet: it works.”

She gave him a rueful look. “When did you become the sensible one in our marriage?”

“You’ve rubbed off on me.” He canted his head. “Are there any other tasks I can help you with? Any other balls you need help juggling?”

She thought about it. Realized how much lighter she felt.

“Not really.” She smiled up at him. “You have been an immense help.”

“Splendid.” A distinctively rakish gleam entered his eyes. “Because now *I* have some balls in need of your impeccable management skills.”

“That’s wicked.” A laugh rustled from her throat. “We cannot possibly in *here*...”

"It's a pressing matter that requires your attention now," he murmured.

He took her hand, placing it against the front of his trousers where, indeed, his arousal was pressing quite forcibly against the placket. She curved her palm around the steely length of him, a quiver going through her blood at his bold virility. She slid her hand lower to cup the pendulous weight of him, and his nostrils flared.

"I suppose I could take you in hand," she teased.

His eyes lit with laughter, lust, and love. He swooped down to claim her lips, and she kissed him back with all the passion in her heart. One thing led to another and before she knew it, he'd spun her around and she was gripping the worktable, her skirts tossed up, her duke's thick, filling thrusts driving moans of bliss from her lips. His relentless onslaught drove her to her peak twice, and when his thumb pushed gently into a forbidden place, she went over again. This time he followed, his lean body shuddering over her, his harsh groans of completion heating her ear.

Utterly replete, she lay sandwiched between the table and her husband's solid warmth. As he stroked her hair, she drifted into a state of drowsy relaxation. She thought dreamily that she could remain this way forever, warm and safe, surrounded by the sound of their mingled breaths and the scent of baking...

"The pies." She opened her eyes. "They're done."

Alaric helped her up, and she grabbed a pair of dish towels, using them to pull the hot tray of pies from the oven. As she set the perfect, golden-brown pastries out to cool, Alaric reached for one. She slapped his hand aside.

"You are going to burn yourself," she chided.

Her husband ignored her, snatching a pie. He blew on it and took a bite.

He flashed a satisfied smile at her. "Having just had my way with you in the kitchen, pet, I think I've demonstrated that nothing is too hot for me to handle."

6

Hogmanay

Hogmanay arrived, and Tessa managed to keep her chin up for most of the big day. The cheerful company distracted her a little from missing Harry. She still hadn't heard from him, and now it appeared certain that he would not arrive in time to ring in the new year.

You're the Duchess of Covent Garden, and here you are acting like some lovelorn miss, she chided herself.

She resolved not to mope. It helped that her sisters-in-law and friends made sure she was involved in the merrymaking and mayhem. Her toddler Bartholomew, who was adorable and a holy terror, also kept her occupied. Bart's favorite toy was the wooden sword that his great-grandpapa and namesake had given him, and his favorite activity was to run around brandishing it at unsuspecting people. Whenever Tessa lost track of him, she went running in the direction of the startled shrieks.

In the afternoon, a refreshed-looking Emma gave a brief introduction to the tradition of "saining the house." The ritual involved blessing the newly cleaned castle with water from a local stream. Afterward, the lady of the house went about purifying the rooms with smoke from a burning juniper branch, which was thought to chase away evil spirits.

The first part went well enough. The children all wanted a chance to toss water about with impunity, and Emma let them participate (although she was wise enough to distribute silver teaspoons, limiting the water throwing to one teaspoon per child). Afterward, it was time for the smoke ritual, and the guests gathered around as Emma selected a branch from a basket, lighting it in the hearth with a ceremonial flourish.

The smoke had hints of cedar and sage, reminding Tessa poignantly of Harry's cologne. As she followed Emma and the guests from room to room, her heart grew heavier and heavier. Everywhere she looked she saw couples in love. Mr. Murray had caught Bea beneath some mistletoe and was kissing his blushing

wife. Marianne was standing next to her husband, Mr. Kent's arm snugly around her waist.

Whatever tension that had briefly intruded upon the Strathaven's marital bliss looked to be completely dissipated: the duke was watching his duchess with pride, adoration...and no little amusement. As Emma marched through the chambers filling them with smoke, he discreetly gestured to the footmen to open the windows: good thing, or they would all be choking on the thick fumes.

Tessa was happy for her dear friends...but she was miserable for herself.

A series of shrieks shattered her reverie. She looked down at her side.

Drat. Bart had gone off again.

Following the screaming, she found her son: he was tearing down the corridor on his short legs, carrying a burning branch in each hand.

"I make fire!" he cried gleefully.

Tessa hurriedly caught hold of him, removing the smoldering sticks from his little fists. When a spark dropped onto the carpet, she hastily stomped it out, grimacing at the burn spot.

"Bart, what did I tell you about playing with fire?" she scolded.

"It fun?" he guessed.

"No, it is *dangerous*. You mustn't do that again." She wagged her finger for emphasis. "Bad boy."

He stared up at her from beneath his mop of chestnut hair. His bottom lip began to quiver, his big brown eyes glimmering. A single tear rolled down his chubby cheek.

Thunder and turf. I'd rather take on a band of cutthroats than a two-year-old.

Sighing, Tessa crouched. "Now, dear, there's no need to carry on —"

"Mama mean," he accused. "Want Papa!"

I want your papa too, she thought wearily.

"Papa isn't here right now, but he will be here soon—"

"Want Papa! Want Papa *now*." Bart stomped off.

As Tessa was about to follow, Harry's sister Polly and her husband, the Duke of Acton, stopped her.

"We'll look after Bart." Polly's aquamarine eyes were filled with gentle understanding. "Why don't you take a break?"

"Are you certain? Bart can be a handful," Tessa said doubtfully.

A smile tucked into Polly's cheeks as she exchanged a look with Acton.

"The only thing more trying than one hellion," Acton said dryly, "is two. We speak from personal experience."

"We will return Bart to the nursery along with our children," Polly said. "I think all the tots could use a nap if they're going to stay up for the festivities this evening."

Gratefully, Tessa accepted the pair's help. Watching them go off together, Polly so pretty with her lustrous golden-brown hair and voluptuous figure, Acton her tall and dashing counterpart, Tessa felt a wave of self-pity. Pushing it aside, she straightened her shoulders and returned to the group.

The rest of the day thankfully passed in a flash. Supper was a feast that offered both English and Scottish fare. Roast goose, beef, and vegetable aspics shared the table with cock-a-leekie soup, meat pies, haggis, and a mixture of potato, onions, and turnips baked with cheese. For dessert, there were cakes, sweet puddings, crisp buttery shortbread, and Cranachan, a confection of toasted oats, whipped cream, and berries.

Everything was delicious and plentiful, and Tessa ate until she was stuffed. She had trouble keeping her eyes open during the entertainment that followed. Rosie sang, Thea accompanying her on the piano, and furniture was pushed aside for dancing in the drawing room. Although several of the husbands asked Tessa to dance, she pled fatigue.

She was tired. And she missed Harry, her grandpapa, and mama...and, yes, Swift Nick. As the image of her furry, bright-eyed companion rose in her mind, her throat thickened. Her heart ached for the feel of him curled over her shoulders, the sweet *tuk-tuk* sounds of contentment he'd made.

Perhaps...perhaps it was time to get another pet.

As the midnight hour neared, Emma gathered everyone around. She embodied the festive spirit in her red velvet gown, sprigs of winter berries adorning her coiffure.

"After the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*," she announced, "we will all remove to the antechamber for the first footing."

"What is a first footing, Aunt Emma?"

This came from little Sophie Kent, who was cuddled next to her bosom chum Miranda Corbett. Like the rest of the children, the girls

were beginning to get droopy-eyed.

“The first-footer is the first person who enters the house during the new year. In Scottish tradition, it is considered good luck to have that person be a tall, dark, and handsome man.” Em gave her husband a mischievous look. “I asked Strathaven to do it, but he said he wanted to stay by the fire and didn’t want to go out in the cold.”

The duke, who was indeed sitting by the fire, raised his glass of whisky in a mock toast.

“Being warm and lazy is the proper way to start the new year,” he drawled.

“Hear, hear,” several of the men called in agreement.

Emma rolled her eyes. “Seeing as I had a lack of volunteers from the gentlemen present, I engaged the services of a local blacksmith who is a professional first-footer. He will arrive shortly after midnight and in his pockets, he’ll be carrying a lump of coal, a black bun, salt, and a dram of whisky. These things are supposed to bring luck, prosperity, and hospitality in the new year.”

Thea went to the piano, settling her blue satin skirts around her. Tremont stood by her side and arranged the pages of the music. As she played the first bars of *Auld Lang Syne*, Bart, who’d been asleep in Tessa’s lap, stirred. He opened his eyes, yawning as the room filled with singing voices. Poignant emotion filled Tessa as she sang Robert Burns’s timeless words:

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?*

When the song ended, Emma herded them all to the front entrance for the first footing. Tessa brought up the rear carrying a sleepy Bart, and the front door opened as they arrived.

“Perfect timing,” Emma said brightly. “Here is our first-footer...”

A tall, dark-haired man came in, shaking the snow off his hat and coat.

It wasn’t the blacksmith.

“Harry,” Tessa breathed.

Her husband’s brown eyes met hers, the warmth in them evident even through the fogged lenses of his spectacles. He returned the

greetings of his family and friends, his gaze never straying from hers as he strode over.

He smiled down at her, so handsome that her heart hurt.

“Happy New Year, sprite,” he murmured. “Sorry I was delayed.”

She would have replied, but Bart came fully awake, shouting joyfully, “Papa!”

Harry bent to give her a quick, hard kiss. Then he took their son.

“How’s my lad?” he asked.

“I play,” Bart said. “With fire!”

Harry shot her a look; she shrugged ruefully.

“The boy gets that from me,” a familiar voice boomed proudly.

Startled, Tessa whirled around to see her grandfather entering. He was swathed in an old-fashioned greatcoat which emphasized his barrel-chested build and leaning heavily on his walking stick. Her stepmama Mavis held onto his other arm.

“Grandpapa, Mama,” she cried joyfully. “What are you...?”

“Your ’usband convinced us family ought to be together o’er the holidays, Tessie,” Grandpapa said. “Decided to make the trip after all.”

“You are most welcome, Mr. Black and Mrs. Todd,” Emma said graciously. “Please come in and warm yourself by the fire.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Yer Grace,” Grandpapa said.

He looked at Tessa. “Why are you blubbering, Tessie?”

“I-I’m not blubbering,” Tessa said. “I-I am just h-happy.”

“It’s the breeding, I expect.” Her grandfather harrumphed. “Take care or my next great-grandchild could come out a watering pot. And we Blacks ’ave no use for that, do we?”

Before she could reply, he wrapped one arm around her and another around her mama.

“Appy new year, my girls,” he murmured.

An instant later, he released them to pick up Bart, who’d been bouncing up and down trying to get his attention.

“Ow’s my favorite lad?” he boomed.

“Scare people!” Bart mimicked his great-grandfather’s ferocious look. “Use sword *and* fire!”

“A true Black through and through,” Grandpapa said with satisfaction.

“Harry,” Emma said suddenly, “what do you have in your pocket?”

Tessa noticed the large bulge in her husband’s coat. Was it...

moving?

"It is the real reason I was delayed." Smiling, Harry came up to her. "But I wanted to give Tessa her present in time for the new year."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a tiny wicker basket: curled up inside was a baby ferret. He lifted the animal out, placing it gently into Tessa's cupped hands. Her eyes stung as she saw the resemblance to Swift Nick from the champagne-colored fur to the eyes blinking at her from within a dark, furry mask.

"Oh, Harry," she whispered. "He's *perfect*."

"It's a she, actually. Of the litter, she most resembled Swift Nick. The breeder said she is one of Swift Nick's nieces."

Tessa rubbed a finger between the ferret's ears, and it made a happy *tuk-tuk* sound. Her joy overflowed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Harry, why don't you take care of your wife?" Emma said briskly. "We'll take the ferret for now. Everyone else, back to the drawing room for toasts. You are welcome to join us, Mr. Smith."

The last was directed at the tall, dark, and confused-looking man who'd walked through the front door. It was the blacksmith, who was probably wondering why no one was paying his arrival any mind.

When the crowd departed, Tessa was left alone with Harry, who took out a handkerchief and dabbed at her cheeks.

"What is the matter, love?" Concern shone in his eyes. "Is it the babe? Are you feeling unwell—"

"No...no. I feel perfectly well now that you are here." She smiled at him through her tears. "Thank you for bringing Grandpapa and Mama. And I love my present, though not as much as I love you."

His eyes flared. "God, I've missed you."

He kissed her, this time with a hungry urgency that made her heart soar. She clung to him, kissing him back with all the love and desire she felt. After a few moments, she broke away.

Aiming her gaze at the thick, prominent ridge that she'd felt and now could see, she whispered happily, "You really did miss me."

"Minx." He gave her a rueful look. "Can you blame me? You haven't been feeling well these past few weeks, and I've been trying to be a considerate husband."

Her friends had been right. Of course.

“Is that why you’ve been out late so much?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“That and I had to make arrangements with the breeder. He lives outside of London now, and the only time I had to meet with him was at night. It wasn’t easy keeping those visits a secret, but I wanted the gift to be a surprise.”

Feeling foolish and light-hearted, Tessa said, “You are the best of husbands.”

“I am glad you think so.” Harry cocked his head. “How are you feeling now?”

“Wonderful.” It was the truth.

“No more nausea? Dizziness?”

She shook her head...and let out a peal of laughter as Harry swept her off her feet. He headed purposefully toward the staircase even as toasts rang from the drawing room.

“But Harry, we can’t abandon the party...”

He covered her mouth with his, turning her protests into moans.

New Year's Day

Outside in the garden the next morning, Emma surveyed her party with a feeling of satisfaction. The sun was bright, scattering diamonds over the carpet of snow. The children were running about, chasing one another and getting along...for the most part.

The adults watched on, looking alternately amused and exasperated at their offspring's antics. Harry, Emma saw, was holding Tessa's hand, and from the pretty glow on the latter's face, all was well again. Their son Bart was racing around the fountain, menacing his peers with his wooden sword while his great-grandpapa beamed with pride.

Emma took stock of her other siblings as well, and their obvious contentment added to her own. Life was like a country road, filled with ups and downs but, in the end, she didn't mind as long as it always led her back here...to home. Home, she realized, was not just a place or even a gathering of the people one loved most: it was that strong, unbreakable feeling of connection. Home was a shelter during difficult times and a celebration during triumphs.

Home was everything.

A familiar strong arm circled her waist, and she shivered as Alaric murmured against her ear, "Pleased with your party, are you, pet?"

He read her so well.

"I am counting my blessings." She leaned into him. "I have so much to be grateful for, darling. Our family is well, and while things aren't always perfect, we get through adversity together."

"That is what counts, love."

Sensing that something had distracted him, she followed the direction of his gaze. Livy had entered the garden. Dressed for the outdoors in a woolen tartan cloak with a matching beret over her chestnut curls, she was skipping alongside the Duke of Hadleigh, who looked both taken aback and amused by her company.

"They make for an odd pair, don't they?" Emma mused.

“Indeed.” Her husband’s tone was thoughtful. “If it weren’t for Hadleigh, however...”

Emma’s throat tightened. The notion was too much to bear.

“We owe him much, and we must think of some way to repay him.” Observing the younger duke’s red-rimmed eyes and gauntness, signs of a dissipated life, she said, “Perhaps your friendship would be a place to start. Hadleigh looks in need of a decent role model.”

“You think I am a role model of decency?” Alaric slanted her a devilish look. “After the way I debauched you last night?”

Emma blushed. She was still a bit sore and deliciously languid from their intimate celebration of the new year.

“Well, you *are* wicked,” she amended, “but mainly when it comes to bedroom matters. Beyond those, you are quite principled. And I do believe that Hadleigh could use a good friend.”

“He shall have one.” Alaric said it like a vow.

“Thank you, darling.”

“No, thank *you*, Emma.”

She smiled at him. “For what?”

“For giving me a family. For being the home I always longed for.” He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, his eyes intense with feeling. “Most of all, for being you.”

Her heart squeezed with answering emotion. “I love you too.”

Their kiss was a tender, passionate tribute to the new year. It brimmed with the sweetness of the past, the joy of the present, and the promise of all the future days ahead.



* * *

Dear Reader,

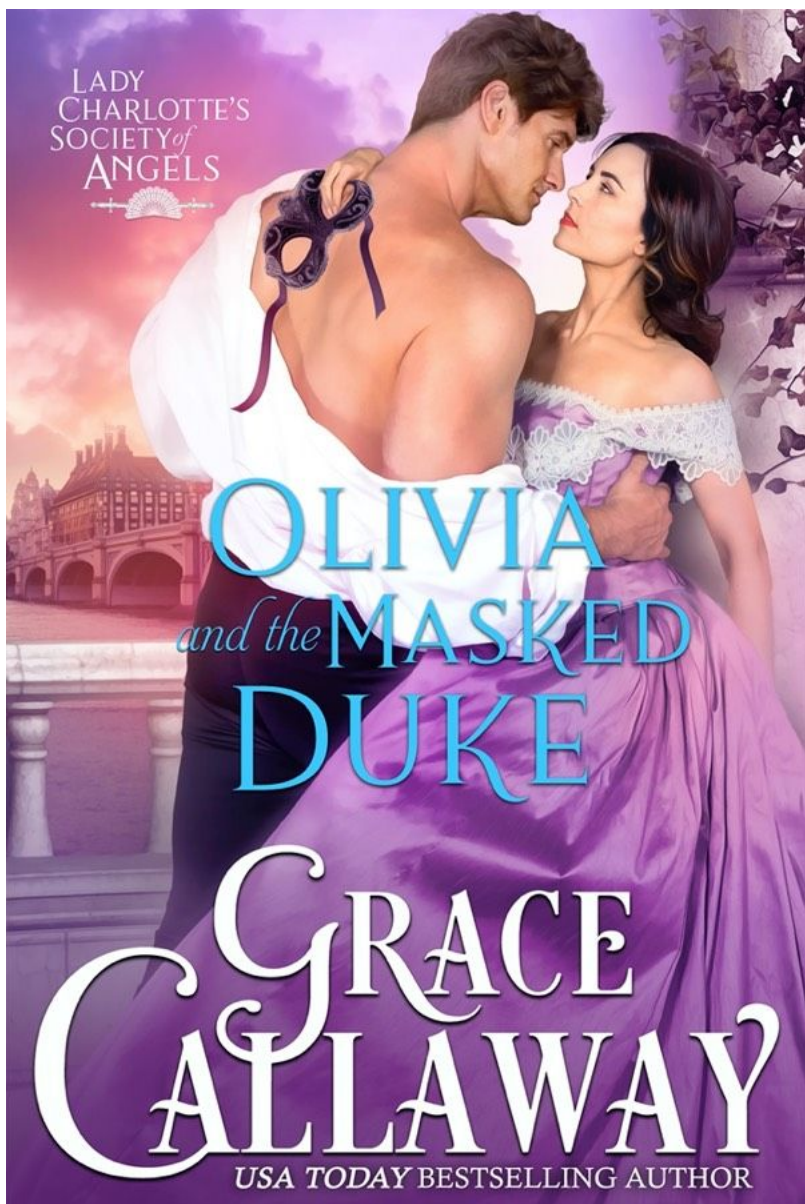
This year has been a challenging one, and it is my fondest wish that this visit with the Kent family and their friends provided a bit of extra holiday cheer. While we might not be able to see our loved

ones in person, hopefully we can celebrate love in other ways. In Emma's words, I hope you find that "strong, unbreakable feeling of connection" however you can, knowing that as long as we hold love and hope in our hearts, there is always light ahead.



* * *

Some of you may be wondering about spirited little Livy McLeod and the Duke of Hadleigh...and for that I have exciting news! Their book, [OLIVIA AND THE MASKED DUKE](#), will be out February 18, 2021 and is available for preorder (just click on the title or the cover below!). In this steamy and passionate tale, Livy is all grown up, ready to have adventures...and to win the heart of her girlhood crush, the Duke of Hadleigh!



Finally, if you've missed the stories of any of the couples in STEAMY WINTER WISHES, the next section has a complete listing of all my titles by series and character!

Stay safe and wishing you much love,
Grace

Also by Grace Callaway

LADY CHARLOTTE'S SOCIETY OF ANGELS

[Olivia and the Masked Duke](#) (Olivia & Ben)

GAME OF DUKES

[The Duke Identity](#) (Harry & Tessa)

[Enter the Duke](#) (Ransom & Maggie)

[Regarding the Duke](#) (Garritty & Gabby)

[The Duke Redemption](#) (Wickham & Beatrice)

[The Return of the Duke](#) (Knight & Fancy)

HEART OF ENQUIRY (Kent Family)

[The Widow Vanishes](#) (Annabel & Will)

[The Duke Who Knew Too Much](#) (Emma & Alaric)

[M is for Marquess](#) (Thea & Gabriel)

[The Lady Who Came in from the Cold](#) (Penny & Marcus)

[The Viscount Always Knocks Twice](#) (Violet & Richard)

[Never Say Never to an Earl](#) (Polly & Sinjin)

[The Gentleman Who Loved Me](#) (Rosie & Andrew)

MAYHEM IN MAYFAIR

[Her Husband's Harlot](#) (Helena & Nicholas)

[Her Wanton Wager](#) (Percy & Gavin)

[Her Protector's Pleasure](#) (Marianne & Ambrose)

[Her Prodigal Passion](#) (Charity & Paul)

About the Author

USA Today & International Bestselling Author Grace Callaway writes hot and heart-melting historical romance filled with mystery and adventure. Her debut novel was a Romance Writers of America® Golden Heart® Finalist and a #1 National Regency Bestseller, and her subsequent novels have topped national and international bestselling lists. She is the winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery and Suspense, the Maggie Award for Excellence in Historical Romance, and the Passionate Plume Award for Historical Novel. She holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan and lives with her family in a valley close to the sea. When she's not writing, she enjoys dancing, exploring the great outdoors with her rescue pup, and cheering on her favorite basketball team.

Keep up with Grace's latest news!

Newsletter: gracecallaway.com/newsletter





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